

The Lack of Mysticism in Ordinary Consciousness

Maria Paula Rayo Gomez

King's University College at Western University

Mystical experiences are the most sought-after experiences by religious practitioners and truth seekers alike because they are considered to be encounters with a divine entity. Researchers are interested in mystical experiences because these events have the potential to produce long-lasting and profound changes on individuals, whether they are religious or not (Cohen, Gruber, & Keltner, 2010). This is because when one has a mystical experience, there is a dramatic shift from ordinary consciousness (OC) to cosmic consciousness (CC). OC is the egocentric mental state, in which an individual differentiates oneself from other objects in the world. This is the state of mind that we find ourselves in everyday life. Alternatively, CC is an unusual state of mind, in which the individual transcends the ego and experiences a sense of merging with the universe. This is the mental state of an individual who is having a mystical experience. Altered states of consciousness (ASC) are on a continuum between OC and CC because they are not completely ordinary like OC but they are also not completely unusual like CC. ASC include mental states such as dreaming, hypnosis, trance, drug-induced states, etc. Since the mystical experience requires an individual to transcend one's ego, it is not likely that a mystical experience can occur directly from OC because the ego is always present in OC. Therefore, a mystical experience can only emerge from ASC because ASC act as mediators between OC and CC.

Grof and Grof (1989) illustrated an example of a typical mystical experience:

Feelings of oneness with the entire universe. Visions and images of distant times and places. Sensations of vibrant currents of energy coursing through the body, accompanied by spasms and violent trembling. Visions of deities, demigods, and demons. Vivid flashes of brilliant light and rainbow colors. Fears of impending insanity, even death. (p. 2)

Although many philosophers have attempted to construct a criterion for the mystical experience, only two characteristics are consistently present across all definitions of mysticism:

transcendence of the ego and a sense of unity or merging with the universe. Outside of these two characteristics, the details of the mystical experience may vary from person to person, including religiosity, emotional states, perceptions, ineffability, and so on.

As mentioned earlier, the mystical experience leads to a mental state called cosmic consciousness (CC). Walters (2008) explained that CC is the divine center of consciousness that is present within each one of us, but it is not recognized until the ego consciousness is transcended. The ego is the conception of “I” that separates oneself from the external world. It consists of various characteristics that define one’s individuality, such as one’s appearance, roles, achievements, fears, attitudes, beliefs, etc. The ego is important according to evolution theory because it enables people to adapt and survive in their environment. However, the ego also stands in the way of the mystical experience, as Walters (2008) explains,

‘I’m a man’; ‘I’m a woman’; ‘I’m an American, a Frenchman, an Italian’; ‘I like modern art’ ...Self-limiting ideas such as these enclose us in a cocoon of spiritual ignorance—we, who in our deeper reality are the eternal Spirit! The process of unlearning takes us to deeper and deeper levels of self-recognition. (p. 105)

This process of “unlearning” is possible through ASC because ASC has the ability to lead us away from OC, where the ego is found.

Nencini and Grant (2010) confirmed that the ability for humans to enter ASC is an innate drive so that we can occasionally get away from the ego that is present in OC. They claimed that this drive is beneficial for the evolution of the individual, as well as the entire human species.

However, the ego may still be present in ASC (Walters, 2008), which explains why people do not have a mystical experience every time they fall asleep and enter the dream state. Although the ego may persist in ASC, these altered states allow the individual to perceive the world from a different perspective than the ego perspective. For example, when we are in the dream state, we can see ourselves from a third person perspective. This explains why it could only be possible to have a mystical experience emerge from an ASC, but never from OC.

Another key characteristic in the mystical experience is the sense of unity or merging that people describe in these profound events. Nencini and Grant (2010) labeled this phenomenon as “cognitive unbinding” (p. 2143), and they predicted that this is what elicits the feeling of merging with the universe. Several ASC have the potential to elicit cognitive unbinding, but this phenomenon was particularly discovered in the drug-induced state. Nencini and Grant (2010) found that the drug psilocybin reduced neural activity in the thalamus, which is the area of the brain responsible for cognitive binding. Furthermore, Persinger (as cited in Baruss, 2003, p. 206) suggested that the mystical experience is a result of excessive activity in the temporal lobe, as some epileptic patients who experienced excessive activity in that part of the brain reported features of a mystical experience. Persinger confirmed the theory when he administered electrical shocks to the temporal lobe of participants who were meditating/praying and they reported a sense of “cosmic bliss” (Baruss, 2003, p. 207). Numerous epileptic patients also reported other ASC as a result of their seizures including dream-like states, feelings of timelessness, and hallucinations (Vaitl et al., 2013). The chaotic neural activity in CC is found as a milder version in ASC because ASC are detected by interruptions of the organized neural networks found in OC (Vaitl et al., 2013). Thus, this data demonstrates that it is plausible to go from an ASC to CC but it is not plausible to spontaneously jump from OC to a CC without a

source of mediation because the neural activity in OC is regulated and organized, whereas the neural activity in CC is extremely disordered and chaotic.

There is evidence that one's consciousness must be altered in order to have a mystical experience because many religions around the world and throughout history have recognized ASC as a sacred practice. Shamanistic and indigenous religions have managed to pass down ancient practices of ASC throughout the generations, which are still practiced today. Accordingly, these practices must have pragmatic value since they persisted for so many centuries. Some examples of ASC that are used for spiritual purposes include rhythm-induced trance, fasting, ritual dancing, breathing exercises, meditation, hypnotic induction, asceticism, dreaming, and the use of hallucinogenic plants. Although there are countless sources of ASC, only a few examples will be considered.

Meditation is one of the most popular forms of ASC, as it is a pragmatic path towards divinity. Some of the religions that utilize meditation are Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Zen, as well as some Western sects of Christianity (Tart, 1969). Although there are various meditation techniques, the most basic technique is to sit up straight with one's eyes closed and completely focus on one's mental events without asserting any judgments (Tart, 1969). Deikman (as cited in Tart, 1969, p. 203) presented a study to determine whether meditation can trigger a mystical experience. Deikman instructed the participants to practice contemplative meditation (the act of concentrating on an object without thinking) for several sessions. The results found that indeed, meditation does provoke a mystical experience, as it elicited feelings of "divine glory" (p. 215) and the ability to transcend from ordinary subject-object differentiation to a sense of merging with the external world. The participants further described sensations of strong emotions, vivid perceptions, a heightened cognition, and transcendence beyond ordinary modes of consciousness

(Tart, 1969). These phenomenological reports confirm the characteristics of a mystical experience.

One could argue that a mystical experience can emerge from OC through the act of mindfulness since mindfulness is analogous to meditation. Mindfulness and meditation are similar because both states of mind demand attentive awareness but the difference is that meditation is an ASC, whereas mindfulness is found in OC. Essentially, mindfulness is about being completely focused on the present moment without asserting any judgments. Various spiritual traditions cherish mindfulness as a founding principle towards a spiritual transformation (Michie, 2010); but could mindfulness be enough to elicit a mystical experience? In short, the answer is no.

Spiritual traditions value mindfulness because it has valuable implications for OC. The benefits of mindfulness are so significant that modern psychotherapy adopted the practice to treat several disorders, such as anxiety and depression (Michie, 2012). However, there is no evidence to conclude that mindfulness alone can produce a mystical experience. Presumably, this is because although one's awareness is heightened in mindfulness, one still perceives the world from the ego perspective. For example, I could be mindful of my feelings without judging them when someone offends me, but I still see myself as a separate individual from the world around me since I still persist in OC. Mindfulness is a powerful tool in psychotherapy because it encourages people to reevaluate their appraisals in OC, but it does not produce a shift of consciousness.

Hallucinogenic substances produce the most dramatic ASC, so it should come as no surprise that these substances are considered highly sacred to various religious groups around the

world. The use of hallucinogenic drugs, also known as psychedelics, is especially prominent in shamanistic traditions. Shamans use psychedelics to induce visionary and ecstatic states for religious rites and healing purposes (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1997). These visions are regarded as encounters with a divine entity, as the drug taker may feel "...a sense of communion by passing beyond the limits of the self; the soul leaves the body, is transported to other levels of the universe, and comes into contact with...spirits of animals, god, demons, or ancestors." (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1997, p. 38). This is an example of how the psychedelic experience produces an expansion of consciousness beyond the limits and barriers imposed by the ego. Hence, psychedelic drugs are used as portals into CC. These drugs are so powerful that they have been used to successfully treat and heal several psychological disorders in clinical settings (Baruss, 2003). Grinspoon and Bakalar (1997) also found that the psychedelic experience resembles a vivid experience of the hypnagogic state. This is an interesting point because the hypnagogic state is a mild ASC that occurs when one begins to feel drowsiness immediately before sleep. The psychedelic experience suggests that CC is simply an extreme form of ASC.

Although there are many religions that deem ASC as sacred practices, there are several other religions that value OC more. For instance, the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam prefer to practice spirituality in OC and they sometimes go as far as condemning certain ASC, such as drug-induced states or sexual intercourse. Thus, one could argue that a mystical experience can emerge from OC by participating in spiritual practices that are cherished in Abrahamic religions such as praying, liturgical services, communal services, contemplation, admiration of religious leaders, or preaching religious beliefs. Wainwright (1981) argues that although these practices are important additions to spirituality, they do not produce mystical experiences because they only go as far as creating sentiments that are habitual. This

means that those religious practices produce certain emotions that can be easily aroused at any given moment and consequently, these emotions construct one's personality. For example, prayer can be practiced at any moment and it could trigger feelings of love, awe, trust and gratitude, but these feelings merely shape one's actions and responses rather than elicit a shift of consciousness. Eventually, these sentiments become just as ordinary as daily habits such as eating or brushing one's teeth (Wainwright, 1981). Thus, these practices reinforce the "ordinary" in OC, which alienates us from the "extraordinary" that is found in CC.

Baruss (2003) discusses a study that supports the preceding argument, called *The Good Friday Experiment*. Pahnke and Leary (as cited in Baruss, 2003, p. 181) conducted this study to find the similarities between the psychedelic experience and the mystical experience. However, the results are compelling because they demonstrate how dramatic ASC can influence religious people who only practice spirituality in OC. Pahnke and Leary examined the experiences of theologian students who ingested psilocybin prior to attending a Good Friday service. The students spent two and a half hours in the chapel, which was just enough time for the drug effects to wear off. Mike Young was one of the participants who described his experience as a profound epiphany as he stated, "religious ideas that [had been] interesting intellectually before...now were connected to something much deeper than belief and theory" (Baruss, 2003, p. 182). Young's experience validates the importance of ASC for the mystics who seek to encounter the divine in CC. This study confirms that regardless of how much one is devoted to religious beliefs, one will never have an encounter with the divine if one remains in OC. Had it not been for this experiment, Young would have spent the rest of his life studying divinity without ever fully understanding it beyond theory.

There are some mystics that belong to Abrahamic religions who are deeply devoted to encountering the divine. Not surprisingly, these mystics practice ASC to elicit mystical experiences. For instance, Sufism is a mystic sect of Islam that uses a technique called whirling to encounter the divine. Whirling is the act of spinning in repetitive circles until one reaches ASC. Additionally, there are several Christian mystics who also use various techniques to provoke ASC, such as meditating, fasting, sleep deprivation, and other forms of asceticism.

Ingesting a psychedelic drug, meditating, whirling, or any other source of ASC does not guarantee a mystical experience. According to Nencini and Grant (2010), a mystical experience is only possible if one is in a heightened state of awareness during ASC. This heightened awareness additionally enables the experience to be preserved in one's memory so that one can recall the experience in the future and be profoundly moved by it (Nencini & Grant, 2010). Furthermore, ASC cannot guarantee CC because in some cases, mystical experiences are spontaneous.

Thus far, I have provided thorough evidence to demonstrate how the mystical experience can only occur from ASC. However, there have been a few cases in which mystical experiences emerged spontaneously from OC. In the first case, Edgar Mitchell was an astronaut who felt a shift of consciousness from OC to CC on one of his trips to the moon (Baruss, 2003). While in space, Mitchell had the opportunity to stare at the Earth through a small window in the spacecraft. Then, he looked past the Earth to the entire universe that surrounded it and instantly felt a deep sense of understanding and interconnectedness with everything around him. Mitchell claimed that the experience was ineffable but it influenced his outlook on life so much that when he went back to Earth, he changed the course of his career and founded the Institute of Noetic Sciences. In the second case, Allan Smith was watching the sunset from his room when suddenly

he felt that he had merged with the light and everything around him (Baruss, 2003). In that moment, Smith understood how the entire universe worked as a harmonious whole and he felt a loving encounter with God for twenty minutes before it began to fade away. The experience was so profound that Smith also switched his career path to pursue the understanding of spirituality.

Although these experiences are undoubtedly mysterious occurrences, there are several possibilities that could explain the outcomes. First of all, the element that was consistent throughout both experiences was a cosmic element. When these mystical experiences occurred, Mitchell was observing the Earth, whereas Smith was observing the sun. Since cosmic consciousness is the outcome of the mystical experience, it is likely that the cosmic elements influenced their consciousness in some way. Perhaps the cosmic elements produced emotions of awe, which might have influenced the neural activity in the brain to produce an ASC. Future studies must be conducted to determine whether observing cosmic elements can influence the neural patterns in the brain.

However, mystical experiences do not simply occur by observing celestial bodies, so there was probably a confounding factor that influenced Mitchell and Smith's experiences. Vaitl et al. (2013) described spontaneously occurring ASC as spontaneous fluctuations in wakefulness. There are four stages that constitute the wakefulness to sleep continuum: drowsiness, daydreaming, hypnagogic states, and sleeping/dreaming (Vaitl et al., 2013, p.4). Mitchell and Smith were likely in a state in between the spectrum of wakefulness and sleep, which resulted in subtle changes of consciousness. If this were the case, it is possible that Mitchell and Smith did not notice they were in a mild ASC prior to the onset of CC, or perhaps they believed that this information would be irrelevant to include as part of their descriptions. Since psychedelics are known to produce mental states that are analogous to the hypnagogic state, it is plausible that

Mitchell and Smith were in a hypnagogic state of mind rather than in OC prior to these experiences. It would be helpful to research these experiences more in depth to determine whether Mitchell and Smith were in an ASC or in OC, but there is no way that these studies can be repeated due to their spontaneous nature. The best that we could do is ask Mitchell and Smith if they felt drowsy prior to their experiences but the answers would not be reliable since these reports were collected approximately twenty years ago. An alternative route to look further into the issue would be to collect phenomenological reports of people who have experienced spontaneous mystical experiences to detect any signs of hidden ASC.

Although the experiences of Mitchell and Smith challenge the main proposition, these phenomenological reports did not contain sufficient information to conclude that mystical experiences can occur directly from OC. Supposing that it is possible to transcend directly from OC to CC, one cannot rely on spontaneity alone to have a mystical experience because the chances are significantly low. Additionally, it would not be evolutionary beneficial to have spontaneous mystical experiences without being able to control them. There are consistent patterns that underlie the onset of mystical experiences, including the cosmic elements in the cases of Mitchell and Smith, which presume that mystical experiences are not spontaneous after all.

The most predictable onset of a mystical experience is ASC, which is why it is such a prominent element in the spiritual practices that were discussed earlier. The goal of mysticism is to transcend oneself from the ego in OC to a higher self in CC. The neural activity found in the brain under CC differs dramatically from the neural activity found in OC but it is similar to ASC, so we can conclude that ASC acts as a mediator between the two states of consciousness. Since it is not possible to randomly have changes in the brain without a source of influence or mediation,

a mystical experience can never occur directly from OC, but it must necessarily emerge from
ASC.

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